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The U.S. Navy's Role in the 1956 Suez Crisis

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Forcible self-help to protect nationals was discussed at length in the February issue of the "Naval War College Review." A practical example of this concept of international law can be found in the actions of the U.S. Navy in evacuating the nationals of 31 countries from the war zone during the 1956 Suez crisis. In this dangerous situation the Navy quickly and effectively accomplished its mission with a minimum use of force and a minimum amount of interference with the political situation in the area. The author's critique of the action taken in the event is an excerpt from a more comprehensive discussion of the crisis.

THE U.S. NAVY'S ROLE IN THE 1956 SUEZ CRISIS

An excerpt from a research paper prepared

by

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The world was shocked and surprised to learn of Israel's attack on Egypt on 29 October 1956. In addition to the Israeli attack, other events of earth-shaking magnitude were taking place. President Eisenhower has related that "October 20, 1956, was the start of the most crowded and demanding three weeks of my entire Presidency."¹ During this time America was concentrating on the final days of its presidential campaign which would climax on 6 November. Unrest in Poland led to an uprising which threatened to erupt in fighting between Poland and Russia. Full revolution broke out in Budapest, which resulted in bitter street fighting against the Russians. The effects of these events on the Suez crisis are still being debated and are too lengthy to be evaluated here.

Operation Kadesh, the code name for the Israeli attack, commenced with the

dropping of Israeli paratroops on Mitla Pass while 12 French Mystere fighters patrolled the Suez Canal.² At sea, the French protected the coast of Israel with the destroyers *Kersaint*, *Bouvet*, and *Surcouf*.³

In accordance with their plan, France and Great Britain issued an ultimatum on 30 October calling for both sides to withdraw 10 miles on either side of the canal. The purpose of the ultimatum was "... to bring about the early cessation of hostilities and to safeguard the free passage of the canal."⁴ The ultimatum specified that it was to be answered within 12 hours, and if the requirements were not met, United Kingdom and French forces would "intervene in what ever strength may be necessary to secure compliance."⁵ To a world already surprised by the Israeli attack was added the surprise of the Anglo-French ultimatum. "It clearly took the United States

Government by surprise as much as any other government."⁶ Nasser is reported as being angry as well as surprised because "... he suspected that England, France, and Israel had secretly planned this action together and his own espionage agents had been unaware of it."⁷ Up to that time he did not think Britain would join any attack. He "considered it most improbable that any responsible Briton would take any such action."⁸ To better understand what the ultimatum involved, Anthony Nutting related:

... if proof were needed of collusion between Britain and the aggressor, it was written plainly enough in the timing of the ultimatum, which demanded that both belligerents withdraw to a distance of ten miles from the Canal at a moment when the Egyptian army was still engaging the Israelis at distances between 75 and 125 miles to the east of the Canal. This meant that, at the moment of its issue, the powers who were pretending to put a stop to the fighting by separating the belligerents were ordering one of them—and the victim of the aggression at that—to withdraw up to 135 miles, while the other, who happened to be the aggressor, was told to advance on all fronts between 65 and 115 miles! The burglar, having been caught in the act of breaking and entering, had been told by the two policemen who found him to help himself to half the contents of the safe, while they moved in to take the rest.⁹

Copies of the ultimatum were handed to the Israeli and Egyptian Ambassadors in London during the afternoon of Tuesday, 30 October, to expire at 0430, Wednesday, 31 October.¹⁰ As expected, Israel agreed to accept the ultimatum, and Egypt refused.

Upon receipt of the news of the Israeli invasion, on 29 October, the Chief of Naval Operations alerted the 6th Fleet by message to make all preparations for evacuation of U.S. citizens in Egypt, Israel, Jordan, and Syria.¹¹ Vice Admiral Brown then dispatched his amphibious ships to positions within 24 hours steaming distance from Haifa and Tel Aviv, Israel; Beirut, Lebanon; and Alexandria, Egypt.¹²

Probably as a result of the news of the ultimatum and in anticipation of possible results, at about 1900, Tuesday, 30 October, three American ships received message orders to sail from their Biblical reference points to Haifa to evacuate U.S. citizens. The three ships were the U.S.S. *Harlan R. Dickson* (DD 708), U.S.S. *Hugh A. Purvis* (DD 709), and U.S.S. *Burdo* (APD 133). Together they were titled Task Group 61.3 and were under command of the Comdr. Frederick L. Edwards, Jr., the Commanding Officer of the *Dickson*.¹³ During the night, while the ships of Task Group 61.3 steamed through the dark Mediterranean toward their destination, important events were occurring near Haifa.

Several hours before the ultimatum expired at 0430, 31 October, the French destroyer *Kersaint* was on the alert, patrolling near Haifa, when it spotted a foreign warship closing on the city. By its silhouette it was identified as a Russian *Skoryi* class destroyer thought to have been given to Egypt. The *Kersaint* stalked its prey then opened fire with its 5-inch guns and radioed for assistance from Israeli motor torpedo boats. Captain Roy of the *Kersaint*, still uneasy about the ship's identity, sent a message report to Admiral Barjot at Cyprus. Admiral Barjot, distressed at the thought that the unidentified ship might be American, radioed Paris, "Have crippled Egyptian destroyer. But not entirely sure it Egyptian. If this should prove a mistake, this is not a deliberate attack on our

part on stray ships of the Sixth Fleet."¹⁴

The exact sequence of events is unclear, but the mystery ship also tried to bombard Haifa. It fired 160 rounds at Haifa from maximum range, most of which fell harmlessly into the sea.¹⁵ Then, additionally pursued by an Israeli destroyer, patrol craft, and rocket-firing jet fighters, the ship tried to escape. Robert Henriques interviewed the commander of the Israeli forces involved who stated that he felt he was being drawn into a trap because, in addition to the fleeing target, several other ships appeared on his radar screen to the northwest. He signaled to the new ships to identify themselves, and they replied that they were American. He flashed "Am opening fire on enemy ship please keep away."¹⁶ The Americans altered course and obliged. These were probably the ships of Task Group 61.3.

The target ship, after being hit several times, stopped and hoisted the white flag of surrender. In the light of dawn it was identified as the Egyptian destroyer *Ibrahim el Awal*. By the count of the port engineers later, it had received "4 direct hits, including one on the bows which blew up an anti-aircraft gun and ignited the paint locker; 1 hit from an armor-piercing rocket from the air, . . . and over 70 holes from splinters on the port side."¹⁷ The crew had tried to scuttle the ship but were hampered by the fact that the keys could not be found to the locks on the sea valves,¹⁸ and some were so rusty they could not be opened.¹⁹ The crippled ship was towed in to Haifa harbor to the delight of throngs of Israelis crowding the docks. *The New York Times* reported that "apparently her officers hoped she would be mistaken for the United States destroyer *Dickson*, due at Haifa to evacuate Americans."²⁰ The Israeli commander reported that the ship "was allowed to approach to within five miles of Israel's coast, and open fire on Haifa, in the belief that she was one of the

American ships whose arrival, at some unstated time, was expected."²¹ By a strange turn of fate, *Ibrahim el Awal* was a former British ship. *The New York Times* listed her as being the former H.M.S. *Cottesmore*,²² but *Jane's Fighting Ships* recounts a different history. *Jane's* says:

This ship, first named *Mendip*, served with the British Navy from October 1940 until May 1948 when she was transferred to the Chinese Navy and renamed *Lin Fu*. She was returned to the British Navy at Hong Kong a year later and reverted to the name *Mendip* but was transferred to the Egyptian Navy in November 1949 and renamed *Mohamed Ali el Kebir* but was again renamed *Ibrahim el Awal* in 1951. She was captured from Egypt off Haifa by Israeli forces on 31 October 1956 and renamed *Haifa*. Commissioned in the Israeli Navy in January 1957.²³

Task Group 61.3 arrived off Haifa at noon, and by 1600 Commander Edwards had completed all necessary arrangements with Israeli authorities and representatives of the U.S. State Department. Shortly thereafter, U.S.S. *Burdo* entered the harbor, embarked 120 evacuees, then stood out of the harbor at about 1930. By this time the harbor was in a total blackout as protection against Egyptian air raids which were expected momentarily. The *Dickson* then entered the darkened harbor to embark the remaining 46 U.S. citizens and foreign civilians. The U.S. ships then steamed to Suda Bay, Crete, where on 2 November the evacuees were transferred to the USNS *General Alexander M. Patch* (T-AP 122), a transport which was to carry several thousand evacuees on to Naples, Italy.²⁴

While the *Dickson*, *Purvis*, and *Burdo* were busy with the preparations for the

evacuation at Haifa, other ships were retrieving Americans in other parts of the Middle East. On 29 October five ships of the 6th Fleet's amphibious forces received orders to sail to Crete to embark the Commanding General of the First Provisional Marine Force and officers of his staff. The five ships were the U.S.S. *Pocono* (AGC 16), U.S.S. *Cambria* (APA 36), U.S.S. *Chilton* (APA 38), U.S.S. *Fort Snelling* (LSD 30) and U.S.S. *Thuban* (AKA 19).²⁵ After embarking the general and members of his staff, *Pocono* and *Cambria* were ordered to steam to Iskenderun, Turkey, where *Pocono* received Adm. Walter F. Boone. Admiral Boone, by virtue of his position as Commander in Chief, U.S. Naval Forces, Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean, was in overall command at the scene. He viewed the crisis as serious enough to require him to leave his London headquarters and go on board his flagship nearer the scene. As *Pocono* and *Cambria* departed for Turkey, the *Chilton*, *Fort Snelling*, and *Thuban* turned south with orders to Alexandria, Egypt.

The sudden activity in Iskenderun and Suda Bay was reflected in many places as a result of the crisis, including an American party in Rotterdam.

The antisubmarine aircraft carrier U.S.S. *Antietam* (CVS 36), leading Hunter-Killer Group 2, had steamed into Rotterdam on 29 October "with advance billing as the largest United States naval force ever to visit the Netherlands. The visit was regarded as an event of both military and diplomatic significance."²⁶ Upon arrival, the commander of the carrier force, Rear Adm. Paul L. Dudley, had issued invitations to the mayor of Rotterdam and other influential city dignitaries for a reception on board the carrier on Tuesday, 30 October. The reception was to be followed by a party in the city. The next morning, Tuesday, with the receipt of the news of the Israeli attack and a grave situation, Admiral Dudley made a

quick decision on his own initiative. "At this time the decision was made to sail the group on the noon tide on 30 October 1956 and save 24 hours on the execution of the inevitable orders since the next high tide during daylight was at noon on 31 October 1956. All that was lacking was orders."²⁷ Since the decision was made quickly and all ships sailed on short notice, time was not available to notify all the invited guests that the ships were sailing. That evening found dozens of disappointed Dutch wandering around a deserted dock, wondering what had happened to the large ship.

The hunter-killer group sailed directly to the Mediterranean to add to Vice Admiral Brown's 6th Fleet. The *New York Times* reported that the hunter-killer group joined the 6th Fleet on 30 October,²⁸ although the ships, leaving the oiler *Neosho* and the submarines *Trumpetfish* and *Halfbeak* behind by their transit at best speed, did not pass Gibraltar until 2 November.²⁹

Meanwhile, at the south end of the Suez Canal, other naval action took place, although it did not involve American ships. During the predawn hours of 31 October, a combined Anglo-French naval force, led by the British cruiser H.M.S. *Newfoundland* was patrolling south of Suez in the narrow straits where the Gulf of Suez meets the Red Sea. Assisting the *Newfoundland* were the destroyer H.M.S. *Diana*, the frigates H.M.S. *Crane* and H.M.S. *Modeste*, the French minesweeper *Jasmine*, and the escorts *Gazelle* and *La Perouse*.³⁰ The *Newfoundland* and the *Diana* spotted a group of merchant ships headed north with a darkened ship following. The cruiser closed the range to the black ship. The cruiser then illuminated it with its searchlights and found it to be an Egyptian frigate. The *Newfoundland* signaled "Stop or I fire."³¹ The ship, later identified as the frigate *Domiat*, did not answer but increased speed, trained her two 4-inch guns on the

cruiser, and turned toward her as if to ram. The *Newfoundland* opened fire at a range of 1,500 yards. The *Domiat* quickly answered the fire, but after nine broadsides from the cruiser's guns, the *Domiat* capsized. It sank 5 minutes later with the loss of over 100 of the crew. Sixty-six Egyptians were picked up from the waters of the Red Sea. The losses on the *Newfoundland* were one killed and five wounded, all of which were incurred as a result of two hits from the *Domiat*'s guns.³²

In keeping with the strange history of the *Ibrahim el Awal*, it was found that the *Domiat* was the former H.M.S. *Nith*, a British frigate of the "River" class, which had been bought by Egypt in 1948 and sailed to Egypt in 1950.³³ Not only were ex-British ships sunk during the crisis, but when the tension started there were two Egyptian ships in British ports. These were two "Z"-class destroyers sold to Egypt in 1955 that were being refitted in British shipyards. Named the *La Qahar* (ex-*Myngs*) and *Alfateh* (ex-*Zenith*), they were subject to the British arms embargo and were sent to Egypt with neither ammunition nor torpedoes in late August of 1956.³⁴

The rising suu over Alexandria on 1 November revealed the side markings on the British and French aircraft overhead and three American ships anchored in the harbor. They were the landing ship *Fort Snelling*, the attack transport *Chilton*, and the attack cargo ship *Thuban*, all of which had arrived the previous evening. The evacuation which followed is probably one of the best known endeavors of the U.S. Navy during the Suez crisis by virtue of the numbers of people involved. When the ships set sail at 1600 on Friday, 2 November, they carried 1,536 evacuees. To properly assess the magnitude of the job of identifying, sorting, and transporting the people to the ships waiting in the harbor, it must be realized that they represented citizens of 31 nations, plus 138 United Nations representatives of

various countries; 755 males and 781 females totaling 1,056 adults and 480 children.³⁵

The three American ships were called "Evacuation Group 'B'" or Task Group 61.4, and were under the overall command of Capt. Frederick W. Laing. Upon arrival at Alexandria on the evening of 31 October, the situation in the city was unclear to Captain Laing, who feared that Americans and other non-Egyptians were being held as hostages in Cairo. As a result, the U.S. Marines made preparations to storm ashore to Cairo to retrieve them. Fortunately, before the Marines had to be employed, contact was made with representatives of the U.S. Department of State in Alexandria, who had gathered all persons who wished to be evacuated and transported them by bus to Alexandria.*

Upon completion of arrangements with the Egyptians, the evacuation processing team of 15 men landed at an Alexandria dock at 0700 on Thursday, 1 November. The team consisted of 13 marines and two naval personnel. The number was limited to 15 by the Egyptian authorities who also specified that none were to be armed and no one could remain ashore after dark. Later in the day the Egyptians allowed 10 more men ashore to help handle luggage.³⁶

The report from the Marine commanding general to the Commandant of the Marine Corps states that "personnel being evacuated were highly excited and in some cases hysterical."³⁷ This can be more easily understood in view of the

*On 29 October, the day of the Israeli attack, the U.S. Navy took control of the American Export Line ships SS *Exochorda*, SS *Exermont*, and SS *Exchequer*. (*The New York Times*, 31 October 1956, p. 12:4.) The *Exochorda* was in Alexandria at the time of the attack and took on board approximately 300 evacuees despite its normal capacity for only 124 passengers. It sailed on 30 October for Naples.

fact that the people in the bus convoys felt that they were running a gauntlet of British and French fighter-bombers on the 100-mile trip from Cairo to Alexandria. They were not directly attacked but the planes could easily be seen, and the smoke resulting from the bombing attacks could be seen for miles. The Marine report continues to say that

... during the two day period of evacuation belligerent aircraft frequently attacked Dekmeila airfield and other military installations in the immediate vicinity of the harbor. Egyptian warships, anchored in the midst of the amphibious ships, fired on attacking aircraft during the raids, which delayed the evacuation and increased the hazards of the operation.³⁸

When the ships were ready to depart, the tension among the passengers still did not slack because of rumors that the Alexandria harbor entrance had been mined. The Marine report states that "fortunately these reports later proved groundless."³⁹ The passengers, reassured by crews, exhibited resolute determination, in contrast to their earlier excitement and hysteria, as the ships steamed from the harbor.

Once clear of the mine threat, Captain Laing sent a message to the Commander of the 6th Fleet consisting of one word: "Outside."⁴⁰ Vice Admiral Brown replied: "Your one-word message is a classic. Your successful evacuation of over 1,500 without fuss or feathers is an outstanding accomplishment. A hearty well done."⁴¹ Captain Ensey later recalled that Admiral Brown was so elated at the receipt of Captain Laing's message that he stated he would have liked to have recommended him for the Medal of Honor and would have if it had been appropriate.⁴²

After receipt of Captain Laing's message, Vice Admiral Brown signaled to

Washington on 3 November, "Evacuation completed. . . All who wanted out have been lifted out. They left in high spirits and excellent health. . . Exodus III:8"⁴³ Several weeks later in an interview, Admiral Brown said that 1,702 were evacuated from the Middle East by ships of the 6th Fleet, 165 by naval aircraft, and 310 by U.S. Air Force planes.⁴⁴ He went on to say that:

... the operation was dramatic because of so many actual and potential dangers. The operation was dramatic in its effect on the fleet. I have never seen morale so high. The operation was dramatic in the happy, bewildered unbelieving but mostly thankful faces of the men, women and children who walked up the gangway and took the hand of some helpfully beaming sailor or marine.⁴⁵

Adm. Arleigh Burke is quoted as saying, "the speedy evacuation of the Americans from the Middle East demonstrated the Navy's readiness to protect United States interests whenever and wherever called upon."⁴⁶

The Navy was proud of its performance, and the evacuees were also proud and thankful. An example of the gratitude of the passengers can be seen in a letter to the Commanding Officer of the *Chilton* from an American doctor evacuated from Alexandria. He said:

When we spied the first U.S. uniforms on the dock we felt wonderful, and finally, when we were aboard the *Chilton* we felt practically invulnerable. I guess we never realized how much the Flag meant to us until we saw it on the stern of the landing craft, and we will never forget how it appeared that night on the *Chilton's* masthead with a spotlight on it.⁴⁷

A Lebanese also evacuated from Alexandria wrote:

The wording is English, but the way I write or express myself is Arabic. Excuse my poor English. But this the exact meaning which I would have said in Arabic.

We are evacuees. Your ship is not for tourism. It is and should remain for military operations. What we experienced was more than courtesies or accomplishment of duties. It is the highest sense of human dignity. . . . We were under the fear of bombs and shells. We cannot feel more secure and happy with the permanent smiles and helping hands of all your men. More over we were escorted by the strongest fleet in the world. . . . In our Arabic poetry when we praise a person's high exploits in generosity we say: *He was always thankful as though he was receiving what he was giving.* That was exactly what you expressed in your communiques and deeds, dear and most respected Commodore and Captains.⁴⁸

Captain Laing recommended each of the captains of his three ships for a letter of commendation. In his letters to the Secretary of the Navy recommending the decorations, he praised each of the captains for "... his thorough knowledge of the situation, keen appreciation for the comfort of body and mind of evacuees, inspiring leadership ... to the end that the task was done without physical injury, or noticeable loss of peace of mind in any evacuee. . . ."⁴⁹

Captain Laing was praised for his performance and was recommended for the Legion of Merit Medal by Commander Amphibious Group 4, Capt. W.K. Romoser. Captain Romoser said:

As senior U.S. Naval officer present, Captain Laing was faced with a grave responsibility for ensuring the safety of evacuees, maintaining the prestige of the United States, providing for the protection of his force, and for avoiding all acts which might unintentionally lead to involving the United States in the armed conflict then in progress around him. By the exercise of commendable tact and firmness at appropriate times, Captain Laing overcame all difficulties and accomplished his mission in an outstanding manner.⁵⁰

Vice Admiral Brown concurred in the recommendation for decorating Captain Laing by saying:

The world and the American people in particular have been given a better understanding of the capabilities of sea power; and the prestige of the Sixth Fleet, the U.S. Navy and the government of the United States has been considerably enhanced through this exceptionally meritorious achievement, in which Captain Laing played a most significant part. The outstandingly successful evacuation of U.S. citizens from Egypt has served to reassure other thousands of American nationals engaged in vital work around the world of the capability and determination of the U.S. Navy and the U.S. government to protect them at a moment's notice.⁵¹

A little-known portion of the evacuation took place at Gaza on 2 November when the *Cambria* embarked 24 United Nations personnel. The *Cambria* and its boats were not attacked "although occasional low level air attacks and random mortar fire were observed in and around the town of Gaza."⁵²

The main combatants of the U.S. forces were orbiting Point Moses when word arrived of the opening of hostilities on 29 October. From Point Moses the aircraft carriers and cruisers moved to a point nearer to Alexandria but still outside sight of land. From this new position the aircraft were within easy operating range for providing protection to Captain Laing's Evacuation Group "B" which was ordered to Alexandria.

The two submarines assigned to the 6th Fleet at the time were the U.S.S. *Cutlass* (SS 478) under command of Lt. Comdr. Carl W. Gronemann, Jr., and the U.S.S. *Hardhead* (SS 365) under command of Lt. Comdr. George P. Steele II. On the 29th they were involved in an exercise in the Adriatic Sea, but upon receipt of message orders, they stopped the exercise and started for their war-time patrol zone stations. On the way they armed all of their war shot torpedoes. During normal peacetime cruising, the war torpedoes were not fully made ready for launching. Each torpedo required several hours of work to complete its final checkout. The *Cutlass* was assigned an area south of Cyprus, and the *Hardhead* was ordered to a zone near Alexandria. Their orders, in general, were to keep track of what took place in their areas, keep out of the way of other ships, and to take no action that could be misinterpreted as being hostile. To accomplish this, they were told to remain on the surface, remain fully lighted at night, maintain a speed of at least 10 knots, and to identify themselves to any other warships. *Cutlass* maintained a watch on all British and French air and sea traffic from Cyprus while *Hardhead* did the same for the area near Alexandria.⁵³ The U.S.S. *Guavina* (AGSS 362), a submarine specially configured to refuel seaplanes was also in the Mediterranean conducting experimental exercises. Since it was a noncombatant, it remained in the western Mediterranean clear of the area of tension.

Upon expiration of the ultimatum at 0430, 31 October, orders were given to the Anglo-French invasion force to steam to a rendezvous north of Port Said. Because of the lack of adequate port facilities in Cyprus, most of the force had to sail from Malta, a thousand miles away, or from Marseilles, 900 miles further west. This main force was handicapped by being limited to the slow top speed of the landing craft which was less than 10 knots.⁵⁴ The sailing of the invasion force was no secret, as evidenced by the front page of *The New York Times* on 31 October which proclaimed "Britain and France Move to Occupy Suez." The page 1 story reported that "British and French troop carrying aircraft and landing craft were reported moving south toward Egypt today for an invasion of the Suez Canal Zone."⁵⁵ It was becoming clear to the world what France and Great Britain had meant in their ultimatum when they said they would "... intervene in whatever strength ... necessary."⁵⁶ *The New York Times* said that "the largest naval concentration seen in the eastern Mediterranean since World War II is believed to be covering the landings. It includes the French battleship *Jean Bart* and five aircraft carriers, two French and three British."⁵⁷ By the time the landings took place, the number of carriers had grown to seven. The British had five, *Albion*, *Bulwark*, *Eagle*, *Ocean*, and *Theseus*; the French had two, *Arromanches* and *Lafayette*.⁵⁸

The first bombs began to fall on Egyptian airfields at 1615, 31 October, from British and French aircraft flying from Cyprus.⁵⁹ The targets were airfield runways, Egyptian MIG 15 fighters, and Ilyushin 28 jet bombers on the ground.

During the next several days while the aircraft maintained their drubbing of Egyptian airfields and the search for Egyptian planes, the seaborne invasion force continued to plod toward the rendezvous. *The New York Times*

seemed to keep a track chart of the progress of the force. In its headlines on 2 November was "British and French Fleets Close on Suez," and on 3 November the headlines read, "British and French Push toward Landing." It cautiously added that "the allies' claim to have neutralized Egypt's air-power appears valid."⁶⁰

The magnitude and seriousness of the news of this period can be seen in a small notice which appeared on the front page of the *Manchester Guardian Weekly*: "We are sorry to appear—for the first time in several years—without a front page picture. The omission is a result of this week's exceptional events, and is not intended to be permanent."⁶¹

As the combined British and French Fleets steamed toward Port Said, it was inevitable that they would meet the U.S. forces. One such encounter occurred when the convoy with the carriers *Theseus* and *Ocean* found that:

... it was under close observation from all the angust might of the United States Sixth Fleet which appeared to be steaming on a parallel course and shadowing the British ships. From the American flagship, the U.S.S. *Salem*—reputedly the heaviest cruiser in the world—a signal lamp flickered: "What ship? Whither bound?" The reply signalled from H.M.S. *Ocean*, "*Ocean*." "What fleet?" evoked no response.⁶²

The main Anglo-French assault force also had a visitor when

... a submarine was detected by one of the destroyers which promptly moved in attack. As it did so the submarine surfaced and hastily hoisted a large United States flag before sailing on the surface down the middle of the convoy. Its presence was queried by the headquarters ship H.M.S.

Meon, who signalled: "Why don't you come join us," to which the reply came: "No thanks, we're holding your coat this time."⁶³

A contemporary source has identified this submarine as the *Hardhead* but doubts that the submarine had been submerged, since its orders were already given to remain on the surface.⁶⁴

When the two submarines *Trumpetfish* and *Halfbeak* entered the Mediterranean, they took patrol stations west of Crete after arming their torpedoes and refueling from the *Neosho* in Suda Bay, Crete.⁶⁵

Nearer Alexandria the invasion force had some minor difficulties. As a British author wrote: "The inconveniences of acting without our most powerful ally were... becoming evident: The U.S. 6th Fleet, helping to evacuate U.S. civilians from Alexandria, was standing in the middle of the British carrier zone."⁶⁶ The British task force commander, Vice Admiral Dunford-Slater, signaled Vice Admiral Brown asking him to move the 6th Fleet because as the admiral said, "You are interfering with my mission."⁶⁷ Vice Admiral Brown replied, "I also have a mission," and refused to move the fleet.⁶⁸ Even though he had a mission, Vice Admiral Brown was not quite sure what it was so radioed to Washington asking "Whose side am I on?"⁶⁹

After the Israeli attack, not only the submarines but all of the 6th Fleet operated at night fully lighted so that they could not be mistaken as hostile by anyone.⁷⁰ The British turned their lights on at night also, "so that Egyptian bombers, if they came, ... would be given ... as good a chance to hit U.S. ships as British."⁷¹ The ships of the 6th Fleet kept track of the invasion fleet as it approached the rendezvous near Port Said but were instructed not to interfere.

Operation Musketeer began at dawn of Monday, 5 November, as British and

French paratroops commenced dropping near Port Said. It had been over 3 months since Nasser had seized the Suez Canal Company. The next day, Tuesday, 6 November, the invasion fleet was ready with a force about equal to that which attacked Anzio in January 1944. It consisted of more than "a hundred thousand men, a hundred and thirty warships, . . . more than a hundred freighters carrying nearly twenty thousand vehicles, and a multitude of landing craft . . ." ⁷² So, with more men under his command than the Duke of Wellington had at Waterloo, General Keightley launched his forces against Egypt at Port Said. In order to spare Egyptian lives, the naval gunfire was limited to the destroyers' guns, which excluded the cruisers and the *Jean Bart* from actively participating in the bombardment. ⁷³ Later that day, because of a multitude of pressures, Prime Minister Eden issued a cease-fire notice effective at midnight, 6 November. ⁷⁴

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The study of the many facets of the Suez crisis of 1956 will probably provide historians with fertile ground for research and military men with lessons to ponder for many years to come. In relation to the U.S. Navy, the crisis can serve as an example of the benefits of being ready. It can also serve as an illustration of the advantage of being prepared to meet any contingency.

As tension mounted, the ships of the 6th Fleet moved closer to Egypt in order to be able to respond in a timely manner to any conflict. By 2 November, only 4 days after Israel's attack on Egypt, all civilians desiring evacuation from the Middle East were safely on their way to Crete for further transportation. Under ordinary conditions it would probably have taken weeks to transport the same number of people, but, by being ready, the Navy was able to carry out the tasks in a timely fashion.

The ships were not only prepared and ready, but they represented the only means suitable to the task of evacuating personnel from Egypt. Military aircraft carried out about one-fifth of the total number evacuated from the Middle East, but were unable to land in Egypt because the airfields were damaged and unusable. Not only was airlift impossible from Egypt, but the United States had no ground forces available to send in to rescue American citizens. Even if such forces had been available in the Middle East, it is extremely doubtful that Egypt would have allowed them to enter peacefully nor would any other Arab country have allowed their passage without further conflict. It was by taking advantage of the unique capabilities of seapower that the Navy was able to quickly complete its mission of evacuation without aggravating the tense and explosive situation.

The study of the Suez crisis also points out the high quality of judgment exercised by the naval commanders and emphasizes the excellent leadership displayed by them. Several examples can be given. One is Admiral Dudley's departure from Rotterdam without orders but with the knowledge that his forces would be needed. Other examples are

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



Lt. Comdr. William B. Garrett, U.S. Navy, graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1959 and holds a master's degree in international affairs from The George Washington University. Following duty

aboard both destroyers and conventional submarines, he was assigned as Nuclear Weapons Officer aboard the fleet ballistic missile submarine U.S.S. *Francis Scott Key*. Lieutenant Commander Garrett is a graduate of the Naval War College, School of Naval Command and Staff (Class of 1969), and is currently serving as Executive Officer aboard the U.S.S. *Sea Fox*.

the efficient operations in Haifa by Commander Edwards and in Alexandria by Captain Laing. Each situation had the definite possibility of resulting in a serious and even tragic event if it had not been completely controlled by the naval officer at the scene.

Finally, as a result of the Suez crisis, promising political careers were ruined, flawless records were blighted, the prestige of nations was gravely damaged, and the judgment and integrity of gov-

ernments were seriously questioned. Through the wreckage of the aftermath of the crisis, the U.S. Navy was one of the few survivors of the conflict which emerged with its reputation not only intact, but enhanced.

As Admiral Brown said in recommending Captain Laing for the Legion of Merit, "The world and the American people in particular have been given a better understanding of the capabilities of seapower."

FOOTNOTES

1. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Waging Peace, 1956-1961* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965), p. 58.
2. Moshe Dayan, *Diary of the Sinai Campaign* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 77-78.
3. Hugh Thomas, *Suez* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 129. Thomas lists *Kersaint* as a frigate, however, *Jane's Fighting Ships 1956-1957* lists all three ships as destroyers of the *Surcouf* class, rated as 2,750 tons standard displacement, armed with six 5-inch guns and six 2.25-inch guns. *Jane's Fighting Ships 1956-1957* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1956), p. 185.
4. "Anglo-French Ultimatum to the Government of Egypt and Israel, 30 October 1956," Donald C. Watt, ed. *Documents on the Suez Crisis* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1957), p. 85-86.
5. *Ibid.*
6. "U.S. Taken by Surprise," *The Manchester Guardian Weekly*, 1 November 1956, p. 1:3.
7. Robert St. John, *The Boss, the Story of Gamal Abdel Nasser* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960), p. 259.
8. Gamal Abdel Nasser, quoted in St. John, p. 259.
9. Anthony Nutting, *No End of a Lesson: the Story of Suez* (London: Constable, 1967), p. 116.
10. Erskine B. Childers, "The Ultimatum," *The Spectator*, 30 October 1959, p. 579; Thomas, p. 125.
11. Letter from Commanding General, 1st Provisional Marine Force to Commandant of the Marine Corps, "Report of Evacuation of U.S. and Foreign Nationals from Alexandria and the Gaza Strip Area during the Period 1-2 November 1956," 31 January 1957, p. 1.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Letter from Commander Amphibious Group 4 to the Secretary of the Navy, "Letter of Commendation; Recommendation for," serial 736, 1 December 1956, p. 1.
14. Terence Robertson, *Crisis: the Inside Story of the Suez Conspiracy* (New York: Atheneum, 1965), p. 168-169.
15. Arthur J. Barker, *Suez: the Seven Day War* (New York: Praeger, 1965), p. 80.
16. Robert D.Q. Henriques, *A Hundred Hours to Suez* (New York: Viking Press, 1957), p. 171.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 175.
18. Barker, p. 80.
19. Henriques, p. 172.
20. Joseph O. Haff, "Seized Warship Shown at Haifa," *The New York Times*, 1 November 1956, p. 3:5.
21. Henriques, p. 169.
22. "Ship Shelling Haifa Seized," *The New York Times*, 31 October 1956, p. 3:1.
23. *Jane's Fighting Ships 1967-1968* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), p. 146.
24. Letter from Commander Amphibious Group 4, 1 December 1956, p. 1-2.
25. Letter from Commanding General, 1st Provisional Marine Force, p. 1.
26. "Special Unit Quits Rotterdam," *The New York Times*, 31 October 1956, p. 12:3. In addition to *Antietam*, other units of Hunter-Killer Group 2 were the U.S.S. *Neosho* (AO 143), U.S.S. *Trumpetfish* (SS 425), U.S.S. *Halfbeak* (SS 352), and six destroyers.

27. Letter from Commander Carrier Division 18 to the Chief of Naval Operations, "Extended Cruise of Hunter-Killer Group 2, 1 October-22 December 1956, report of," 28 December 1956, p. 1-7.
28. "U.S. Strengthens the Sixth Fleet," *The New York Times*, 31 October 1956, p. 12:2.
29. Letter from Commander Carrier Division 18, p. 11-43.
30. Barker, p. 104.
31. *Ibid.*
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Jane's Fighting Ships 1956-1957*, p. 171.
34. "Ban Hits Egyptian Ship," *The New York Times*, 25 August 1956, p. 2:3; "Ship for Egypt Tested," *The New York Times*, 30 August 1956, p. 2:4.
35. Letter from Commander Transport Amphibious Squadron 6 to the Secretary of the Navy, "Letter of Commendation, Recommendation for," serial 823, 29 November 1956, p. 1.
36. Letter from Commanding General, 1st Provisional Marine Force, p. 2.
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
40. "1,500 Evacuated from Alexandria," *The New York Times*, 3 November 1956, p. 5:4.
41. *Ibid.*
42. Interview with Vice Adm. Lot Ensey, U.S. Navy, Chief of Staff, U.S. 6th Fleet during the Suez crisis, Washington: 13 February 1969.
43. "The Best Job in the Whole Navy," *Life*, 10 December 1956, p. 146. Exodus 3:8: "And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey; . . ."
44. "When Trouble Came in Mediterranean; the Story of a U.S. Fleet in Action," *U.S. News & World Report*, 14 December 1956, p. 30-33.
45. *Ibid.*
46. "U.S. Evacuates 2,521," *The New York Times*, 6 November 1956, p. 2:4.
47. U.S. Naval History Division, *The United States Navy; Keeping the Peace* (Washington: 1966), p. 33.
48. Letter from Commander Transport Amphibious Squadron 6 to the Secretary of the Navy, "Recommendation for the Award of the Medal for Humane Action," 1 January 1957, enclosure (1), p. 1. In this letter Captain Laing recommended each member of Task Group 61.4 for the Medal of Humane Action but this was later disapproved by the Secretary of the Navy.
49. Letter from Commander Transport Amphibious Squadron 6, 29 November 1956, p. 1.
50. Letter from Commander Amphibious Group 4 to the Secretary of the Navy, "Legion of Merit, Recommendation for," serial 728, 30 November 1956, p. 1.
51. Letter from Commander, U.S. 6th Fleet to the Secretary of the Navy, First Endorsement of Commander Amphibious Squadron 4, letter serial 728, 30 November 1956, p. 1.
52. Letter from Commanding General, 1st Provisional Marine Force, p. 3.
53. Interview with Capt. Carl W. Gronemann, Jr., U.S. Navy, Commanding Officer, U.S.S. *Cutlass* (SS 478) during the Suez crisis: Washington, 19 March 1969.
54. Interview with Comdr. Norman R.D. King, Royal Navy, student at Naval Command Course, Naval War College, Newport, R.I.: 11 February 1969.
55. Drew Middleton, "Forces Take Off," *The New York Times*, 31 October 1956, p. 1:8.
56. Watt, ed., p. 86.
57. Middleton, p. 1:8.
58. Barker, p. 30.
59. Bernard Fergusson, *The Watery Maze, the Story of Combined Operations* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961), p. 394.
60. Drew Middleton, "Bombing Pressed," *The New York Times*, 3 November 1956, p. 1:8.
61. "U.S. Taken by Surprise," p. 1:4.
62. Barker, p. 90.
63. *Ibid.*, p. 98-91.
64. Gronemann interview.
65. Interview with Capt. Edward C. White, U.S. Navy, Commanding Officer, U.S.S. *Halfbeak* (SS 352) during the Suez crisis, Washington: 12 March 1969.
66. Thomas, p. 141.
67. Interview with Rear Adm. Howard S. Moore, U.S. Navy, Nuclear Weapons Officer and Tactical Air Officer on the staff of Commander, U.S. 6th Fleet at the time of the Suez crisis, Washington: 14 March 1969.

68. *Ibid.*

69. Interview with Mrs. Charles R. Brown, wife of Vice Admiral Brown, Washington: 17 March 1969. (Vice Admiral Brown was unable to be interviewed, due to illness, but answered questions through the help of Mrs. Brown.) Interview with Capt. Dale C. Brumbaugh, U.S. Navy, Assistant Fleet Communications Officer on the staff of Commander, U.S. 6th Fleet at the time of the Suez crisis, Clifton, Va.: 21 March 1969; Ensey interview.

70. Ensey interview.

71. Thomas, p. 141.

72. Robertson, p. 173.

73. "Franco-British Attack on Suez," *Life*, 19 November 1956, p. 40; Cyril Falls, "Operation Musketeer," *Brassy's Annual 1957* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), p. 80.

74. Sir Charles Keightley, "Operations in Egypt—November to December, 1956," *London Gazette*, supp., 10 September 1957.



Since World War II, the Sixth Fleet has exercised the definition of its motto—"Power for Peace." It has been a steadying influence in the conduct of international affairs in Europe, and the mere presence of a grey hull on the horizon has eased situations which had come under extreme tension. In exercising Power for Peace, the Sixth Fleet has not fired a shot in anger since World War II.

—Paul H. Nitze, Secretary of the Navy, 11 May 1966